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SUBJECT: CHAD: KEBZABO ON OPPOSITION UNITY AND OBSTRUCTION

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Southern Muslim leader Kebzabo acknowledges that the regime has more to fear from the armed rebels than from the democratic opposition but the latter is relatively unified for the first time and determined to go beyond boycotting the coming election. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Saleh Kebzabo, just returned from travel to Mali, received poloff March 31 for a two-hour discussion. He dismissed rumors that he had been traveling because he wanted to avoid pressure from President Deby and his henchmen to put his name forward as a candidate in the May 3 presidential election or because he wanted to distance himself from his fellow opposition leaders in the coalition CPDC. The trip to Bamako was a long-standing plan, and during his travel he had maintained constant contact with his CPDC partners. He was aware that a few of the lesser CPDC leaders had been approached by Deby with significant enticements, but he had not been personally so approached, and it was notable that none of the 20 party leaders in the CPDC had succumbed. The four personages who had thrown their name in as candidates were, according to Kebzabo, of course not worth discussing, not opposition at all but mere Deby hangers-on.

¶3. (SBU) Kebzabo said that the upcoming election represented a tragic backward step for Chad. It would be the worst election farce since Deby came to power. Kebzabo did not enjoy boycotting elections. He wanted to run. He would have done so again in this election, even if he were sure Deby had retained the capability to fix the result, if only Deby had made a few concessions, just a little nod in the direction of democracy. Deby could have made a modicum of effort to talk to the opposition, he could have cleaned up a few of the many major areas of fraud, such as the double documentation at voting booths or the four days allotted to nomads for voting or the fictive voter registration. But Deby had been unwilling to pursue even the most superficial dialogue or make the most superficial concessions. Certain of his total support from France and apparently certain of the passivity of the rest of the international community, Kebzabo said pointedly, Deby had treated the democratic opposition as if it did not count or exist.

14. (SBU) Kebzabo acknowledged that there were limits to what the democratic opposition could do to get Deby's attention. The overwhelming boycott and universal lack of interest in the June 2005 referendum that had granted Deby the right to run for a third term had not seemed to bother him much. The democratic opposition would have to do more now than merely boycott. Thus, the CPDC was determined that there would be an "active boycott." The CPDC leadership had not yet coordinated a detailed strategy, but, suffice to say, there would be widespread attempts by the opposition to prevent the actual vote taking place. Kebzabo admitted that Deby had a monopoly on the nation's force of arms and resources and, for this reason, Deby would probably be able to prevail easily in squelching this "active boycott." But he had given the democratic opposition no option but to do what it could -- with its limited capabilities and its mind-set oriented to peaceful methods -- to stand up to this charade.

15. (SBU) What made the election even more of a charade, Kebzabo said, was the present context of coup plots and warfare on the eastern frontier. By a long shot, Deby was not so cavalier about the armed opposition as he was the democratic opposition, and, sad as it was to say, he had far more reason to be preoccupied with the armed opposition, given how he himself came to power. For his part, Kebzabo said he deeply feared an armed takeover -- in this, he shared Deby's concern. Kebzabo said that he was in contact with certain of the rebels (he refused to give more information on this point) and could affirm that the battle at Hadjar Marfaine on March 20 was not nearly the sweeping victory over the SCUD rebels that the government or journalists had portrayed. The journalists had been shown only what the government wanted them to see. The SCUD retained the capacity to have another go and was regrouping, according to his information. Meanwhile, Kebzabo continued, the previous day (March 30) the Chadian armed forces had suffered a severe blow further south at the hands of Mahamat Nour's RDL. This sort of fighting, with potentially severe consequences for the Chadian armed forces and for Deby, was likely to continue right up to the election, and beyond, in Kebzabo's estimation.

16. (SBU) Poloff asked whether Kebzabo thought his somewhat unusual status as a Southerner who was also a Muslim gave him any advantage as an aspirant to national office. Kebzabo said that religion was, or had become in recent years, the most potent dividing line in a much-divided nation. However, he had always seen himself -- and been widely seen among the populace -- as a Southerner planted in Lere, and not particularly as a Muslim. When he had campaigned for president in 2001, he had not wanted to try to exploit the Muslim card in any way, because it was a dangerously two-edged sword -- emphasis on it could cause loss of Christian support while not bringing in Muslim support. Chadians of his generation had not tended to see the country through a religious or ethnic perspective, as Chadians did now. There had been a North and a South and people had thought of a few major ethnic groups, Gorane and Sarah but not much else. Few had even heard of the word "Zaghawa," much less of any Zaghawa clans and subclans.

17. (SBU) Kebzabo said that Deby had fomented ethnic perception and dissension, as it was essential to his continued hold on power that the Muslims and Northerners automatically oppose any Southerner or Christian. The regime used many methods to fix the results of the elections, but one of the most potent methods was not electoral fraud in the technical sense of tampering with results -- it was the use of prefects and sub-prefects to fan out to every village chief, especially in Muslim areas, to twist their arm to turn out a unified village vote for the regime. However, Kebzabo believed that the regime could no longer automatically count on the Muslim vote. Impoverishment and degradation were a generalized phenomenon touching Muslim and Christian alike, as all communities recognized that a tiny elite was robbing them blind. The only way to know for sure how Muslims would vote would be a free and fair election, which Deby was more determined than ever to prevent.

18. (U) Bio note: Saleh Kebzabo heads the UNDR (Union Nationale pour le Developpement et le Renouveau). He is a Moundang from Lere on the Cameroon border in the South (Mayo Kebbi Ouest), the country's most populated region. A journalist, born in 1947, he became a major opposition figure in the early 1990's, after having founded the country's first independent weekly newspaper. He made a surprise decision in 1996 to back Deby during the first presidential election campaign, explaining that he sought to promote national unity. He served as foreign minister 1996-97, subsequently as minister of public works/transportation and then as minister of mines/energy/oil. He has served intermittently in the National Assembly but now holds no official position.
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